From the Chinguetti mosque to Dubai towers, Extraversion, connections and neo-urban society in a globalized Mauritania

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FROM THE CHINGUETTI MOSQUE TO DUBAI TOWERS

"EXTRAVERSION", CONNECTIONS AND NEO-URBAN SOCIETY IN A GLOBALIZED MAURITANIA

BY ARMELLE CHOPLIN*

In July 2009, Mauritanians could see on the web a video of the presidential candidate, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz, now president of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.[1] The video, entitled 'Le changement constructif", showed the foundation of a new modern city, with skyscrapers, malls, pipelines and luxury resorts. An open water-tap symbolized the victory of the development in the desert initiated by President Aziz. In the middle of high towers clearly inspired by the Gulf Emirates urban model, was the mosque of Chinguetti.[2] For present-day urbanized Moorish people, this mosque reminds us of the strong link with the old religious towns in the *baddiyya* (desertic bush). Its image implicitly evokes this space of traditional nomadic culture. This old mosque contrasts with the images of a new world-city springing up in the desert. Although the video is fictitious, Mauritanians are persuaded to think that it could become reality thanks to the announcement of oil exploitation, bringing economic development, success and wealth. The Australian oil company, Woodside, discovered supplies in 2001 and has been exploiting them since 2006, fostering hopes that Mauritania will become a new oil emirate. Unfortunately, this is taking a long time to happen. Indeed, this political video seems to be completely extravagant and unrealistic. Its images of a globalized Mauritania are at odds with the dramatically weak scores of the country in economic and social development.[3] In this article, I try to show how globalization is a dynamic at work in Mauritania, despite its contradictory effects and unexpected outcomes. I will tackle this issue from different but correlated points of view: the economic extraversion (see below), the links with the outside world, especially the Middle East, and the symbolic connection (*branchement*), forming new ideas about the state and discourses of belonging.

Like many other African countries (Cooper, 2002), Mauritania is involved in a '*longue durée*' process of "extraversion" (Bayart, 2000). Bayart defines "extraversion" as a historical phenomenon in which 'the leading actors in sub-Saharan societies have tended to compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power and in intensifying the exploitation of their dependants by deliberate recourse to the strategies of extraversion, mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment' (Bayart, 2000: 218). We can develop this idea by stressing the fact that in Mauritania, this extraversion process is ancient, even if it has changed since the trans-Saharan caravan era of Chinguetti (Bonte, 2000). Nowadays, fruit and vegetables, second-hand electrical appliances, and also stolen cars, cigarettes and cocaine smuggling have been substituted for the salt caravans, gum Arabic, old manuscripts and slave trade. The export of iron and fish provide the most important part of the national income. Recently discovered oil and gold exploitation are reinforcing this dependence on the sale of natural resources to the outer world. Increasing exchanges and flows of objects and people emphasize intense transnational circulation.

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[1] I owe a special debt to Riccardo Ciavolella for his helpful reading and useful suggestions for improvement.

[2] Chinguetti is one of the four ancient towns of Mauritania, with Oulata, Tichitt and Ouadane. It was an important place for assembling Maghreb pilgrims on the way to Mecca. The city is renowned for its rich libraries with medieval manuscripts. Before modern Mauritania, the Moors were identified as natives from Bilad ash-Shinguitt.

[3] In 2005, half the Mauritanian population lived below the poverty line. The human development index (HDI) ranked the country at 154th out of 175. In 2008it was ranked 137th.

Obviously, theses new exchanges and connections entail important spatial and identity changes. As the prospective future physiognomy of the capital city Nouakchott shows, the modern insertion of Mauritania into the global economy has a critical impact on a symbolic dimension, by reference to the Gulf Emirates. For this peripheral Arab state, the Gulf Emirates epitomize economic development, success and wealth, thanks to oil exploitation, and represent a specific cultural model, a specific idea of modernity. This is particularly important for the Mauritanian government, for which the belonging to the Arab world is a contested political issue. Thus, the Gulf architectural and urban model symbolizes the materialization of the Arab route to hyper-modernity. The Al-Khaima Centre, the new luxury shopping mall erected in Nouakchott downtown, presents one of the more outstanding illustrations of this sharp shift. The tent evokes traditional society and pretends to symbolize a direct continuity with the past dimension of nomadic and rural life. While claiming authenticity, it represents the contemporary and globalized need of displaying tradition merged with hyper-modern urban architecture and the centre attracts a new urban society. The state turns to Dubai towers rather than to Chinguetti mosque, while the elite and the new generation of urban Mauritanians are caught between rhetorically affirmed traditional values and new aspirations to the Dubai version of modernity. Through this opposition between Chinguetti mosque and Dubai towers, I would enhance the ambivalence of globalization: on one hand, the process is structural and its effects are evident, materializing in economic development and urban changes. But for the great majority of Mauritanians, the globalization is more symbolic than real and gives rise to frustration.

Fig. 2 The Chinguetti mosque. Photo : A. Choplin, 2004

FIG. 2 THE Al-Khaima center with the nomadic tent on the top.
Photo : A. Choplin, 2008

CRUDE OIL INSTEAD OF GUM ARABIC: ECONOMIC "EXTRAVERSION" AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL FRAME

The modern Mauritanian territory has been a space of multiple commercial flows since the time of the Moorish emirates and Senegal River Wolof, Haalpulaar and Soninke political entities. Interactions with Europeans first consolidated internal and external slave trade and then, with the French settling along the Senegal River, intensified the gum Arabic trade and commercial paths between southern Morocco and Senegal (Bonte, 2000). Moorish merchants moving around the whole region between Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia had been powerful middlemen in the groundnut (and other items) trade, while controlling the Saharan commercial pathways and participating in the river transportation system. Even with colonization from the beginning of the 20th century, the French were more interested in trade and export than in local production. In the north, iron mining only began in 1952 with the establishment of the French company Mines de fer de Mauritanie (MIFERMA) (Bonte, 2001). A 700 km railway linked the iron mining centre of Zouerate with the port of Nouadhibou. With independence in 1960, the extraversion of Mauritania went on. The economy remained polarized on Senegal: the country's first road (1970) linked Nouakchott to Rosso and, by extension, the port of Dakar, the principal supply point for Mauritania. Rapidly, popular and leftist political and intellectual movements denounced this dependence on the former colonizing country and Senegal and criticized it as an obstacle to the existence of Mauritania as an independent and self-reliant state. The first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, tried to break French influence: in 1973, the country became a member of the Arab League, reconsidered cooperation agreements with France and replaced the CFA franc with the ouguiyas currency (Ould Daddah, 2003). In 1974, MIFERMA was nationalized and became the Société nationale industrielle et minière (SNIM). In order to refocus the country's economic activities on the national arena, the government undertook major schemes to build new infrastructures: it enlarged the Nouakchott airport and created a new port. It inaugurated the new road, the Route de l'espoir, in 1978, thus linking the capital to the eastern regions

which had previously turned to neighbouring Mali. Finally, Daddah joined the war against the Polisario in 1975 in order to assert Mauritanian sovereignty over the occupied Western Sahara area. These symbolic acts aimed to announce the birth of Mauritania as a real independent country.

In the 1970s, the droughts caused a crisis in the agropastoral system: rural masses migrated to Nouakchott hoping to convert to modern working activities. In order to diversify the national income and to find new sources for food supplies, the government turned towards the seaside, hitherto a neglected area (Le Coeur, 1994). Thus, the 1980s were characterized by an increasing exploitation of local fish resources. This made Nouadhibou a prominent economic centre, attracting new activities. It became the newly declared economic capital of the country, where fortunes could be made very quickly.[4]

Mauritanian geopolitical relations followed this economic evolution. The government tightened links with Russia, where some young students and future intellectuals were trained, and China, which became a friend country. Beijing financed and built up the presidential palace and many other infrastructures such as roads, the power station and especially the port in Nouakchott. Under the authoritarian rule of President Taya (from 1984), political and economic collaboration grew with Libya and Iraq, two Arab countries considered progressive. The government policies of Arabization, which turned out explicitly to be discriminatory against Negro-Mauritanians in the 1980s, explained these geopolitical reorientations. This led to the 1989 events, an international crisis with Senegal. Mauritania was then supported by Saddam Hussein, even if the rest of the Arab world supported Dakar rather than Nouakchott.[5] This alliance became embarrassing after the first Gulf war and the dramatic overturning of Taya.

During the 1990s, Taya's government was looking for support and legitimacy from western countries and the international community. Particularly, it was seeking World Bank support. President Taya opted for a democratization process and allowed so-called 'transparent' elections in 1992. Israel opened an embassy in 2001 in Nouakchott. Democratization and these new relationships consolidated the ruling elite and favoured the conversion of the privileged traditional elite from rural activities to modern business, controlling new profitable economic sectors (fishing, finance via Arab capital, contracts with foreign donors).

The recent oil discoveries forecast a new stage of this extraversion process.[6] Mauritania is strengthening its ties with the Arabian Peninsula. The business elite thinks that their vast and underpopulated country[7] could follow the model of the Emirates. In March 2008, Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, paid a visit to President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. They signed an economic agreement. In April 2008, Sultan Ahmed Bin Selim, manager of Dubai International Development, came to visit Nouakchott with a delegation of UAE investors, in order to evaluate investment opportunities, particularly in the banking, energy, tourism and mining sectors. The emir of Qatar is planning to create a joint business company for facilitating transactions between Mauritania and the Arab Peninsula, for Mauritanian businessmen frequently travelling to the Gulf. The flying and shipping lines between Nouakchott and Dubai have fostered increasing flows of containers from the emirate

[4] In 1970, the population of Nouadhibou was already estimated at 18,000 inhabitants, consisting of 11,500 Mauritanians, 3,000 sub-Saharan Africans, 1,800 French and 1,000 Spanish, mainly from the Canary Islands (Bonte, 2001).

[5] Senegalese and Mauritanians used the expression 'events of 1989' to refer to the struggles that took place along the Senegal River in April 1989. Fuelled by the Mauritanian government, and initially with Moors opposing the black African population, the situation degenerated into open conflict between the two countries. The Senegalese residents were driven out of Mauritania, and, in retaliation, Mauritanians were evicted from Senegal. See Leservoisier, 1994; Fresia, 2009; Ciavolella, 2010.

[6] For more details on this extraversion process, see Choplin and Lombard, 2009.

[7] Three million inhabitants in 2007.

(estimated at 30 per cent of container admissions at the port of Nouakchott, while 25 per cent are from China).[8]

Libya is another critical partner. It has expanded its relations with Mauritania since 2005. Uneasy relationships marked the early 2000s at the time of the Mauritanian recognition of the Hebrew state of Israel. But nowadays, after several regime changes in Mauritania, Colonel Qaddafi seems to be finding a more favourable context for building up partnerships, and is apparently interested in the new oil production in Mauritania. In March 2009, following the expulsion of Israel's ambassador by President Aziz, Qaddafi went to Nouakchott. He proposed to allocate $500 million for investment and cancelled the debt interest to facilitate Mauritanian development. He tried to mediate between Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the military coup's leader, and the Front National de Défense de la Démocratie (FNDD), with obvious sympathy for the former. It is said that he financed President Aziz's political campaign. He also invited him, as the new elected president, to celebrate his 40 years in power.

However, political reconciliation and economic exchanges with the Arab world should not be overestimated. Multiple projects are promised, but the outcomes are still to be seen, while incomes remain low. The oil particularly is not profitable. The offshore oilfields, 90 km southwest of Nouakchott, have been exploited since 2006 by Woodside. In late 2007, after an embezzlement scandal, Woodside sold its operating licence to the Malaysian giant oil company, Petronas. Various oil companies were granted new oilfields discovered in the onshore Taoudenni area: Total (France), Repsol (Spain) and CNPC (China). The experts estimate the potential supplies at 400 million barrels of crude oil: Mauritania could become one of the ten largest African producers. Moreover, 30 billion cubic metres of gas is still untapped. Actually, the daily extraction, initially estimated at 75,000 barrels,[9] is only around 15,000 barrels. Moreover, the oil is poor in quality and so is sold below world prices. In 2006, the oil production yielded 132 million ouguiyas but, one year later, only 55 million ($19 million),[10] far from the $350 million per year initially announced.

NOUAKCHOTT, DAKAR, DUBAI, YIWU : CONNECTED NETWORKS, PLACES AND PEOPLE

These new policies generate connections with several countries. They entail new parallel circulation led by some members from the politico-commercial elite (Bayart, 1993), who operate inside the main political circles. Some transnational groups take advantage from trading. However, even ordinary individuals participate in these transactions. Many foreigners find Mauritania is under-exploited in economic terms for new business activities and are frequently going back and forth between their native country and Mauritania.

Obviously, the most important group participating in this network economy is the Mauritanian diaspora.[11] It is large, discreet but influential, particularly the long-lasting established Moorish diasporas. Some eastern tribes have created transnational business networks, for example the Ideyboussat and Tajakanet tribes, powerful respectively in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Actually, the Tajakanet tribe is known for its religious influence and its links with diamond extraction (Ould Cheikh, 2004). After doing business in Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia, some of them have been able to transform this economic and financial capital into political capital, becoming important political personalities.

[8] Figures and information gathered in Nouakchott, November 2008.
[9] *Marchés tropicaux* no. 1536, 2004.
[10] Office National des Statistiques, *Annuaire statistique 2007*.
[11] 250,000 Mauritanians live abroad, 10 per cent of the total population, and a larger overall number than that of foreigners resident in Mauritania, 50,000 of which live in the Cote d'Ivoire, 20,000 in Saudi Arabia, 20,000 in France, 20,000 in The Gambia, 20,000 in Mali, 10,000 in Senegal, 4,000 in the United Arab Emirates, 2,500 in Congo and 2,000 in the Canary Islands (Ould Ramdan, 2007).

Other tribal strategies have a specific transnational dimension, specifically the large tribe of the Kunta, living on both sides of the Mauritanian-Malian border. Its spatial influence gives some of its members the opportunity to develop business in Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Algeria (Scheele, 2008). For instance, some members have spun off an important bus company (SONEF) between Nouakchott and Bamako, benefiting from government compliance. While all the Malian bus companies had problems with Mauritanian authorities in October 2008, the Kunta's buses ran easily between both countries.

The recent work by Lesourd (2006) on Mauritanian businesswomen has clearly shown some successful strategies in international trades. She presents some *petites commerçantes* who move between neighbouring countries such as Senegal or Morocco. Some of them often visit Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, considered by some Moors as the Mauritania supermarket. The *grandes commerçantes* have been moving between Nouakchott and Paris, where they stock up with on luxury goods, and more recently the Arab Peninsula. They take advantage of the pilgrimage to go and visit Dubai where they buy jewellery, handbags and shoes and sell them once back in Mauritania. Finally, the richest minority even goes to China. They visit Shanghai, Guangzhou and especially Yiwu, a city in southeastern China where Arab traders regularly go (Pliez, 2007) and 200 Mauritanians live (Gaborit, 2007).

Although they do not operate on the same scale, Mauritanian Soninke traders occupy a key place in the import sector. They provide Mauritanian markets with second-hand items. In a downtown neighbourhood called Arrivage, they sell old refrigerators, televisions, flatirons, sewing machines, computers, hi-fi equipment, clothes and bicycles. All the managers of these shops are Soninke natives of Kaedi, the principal town of the Middle Senegal River valley, and live in the Netherlands, Germany or France, where there has been an important diaspora since the 1950s. They travel back and forth between Europe and Mauritania every two or three months. In Europe, they buy second-hand merchandise; in Nouakchott they receive and unload their containers. In the last years, this initial configuration between Europe and Mauritania has expanded, in particular to Senegal and Mali, where Soninke traders have relatives, and recently even directly to China. These businessmen and businesswomen can act both alone through individual entrepreneurship and collectively, in particular thanks to diasporic kinship networks. Their mobility and trade activities rely on extensive transnational networks.

Moreover, many foreigners, particularly Senegalese, Guineans and Malians, live in Mauritania. They have constituted an important part of the Mauritanian population since independence. Yet the recent concern of European media and institutions over migrants in small fishing boats has led to a focus on clandestinity even within Mauritanian borders. This results in confusion between long-term immigration in Mauritania and recent migratory transit through Mauritania towards Europe, neglecting the first one.[12] West African migrants have been essential for Mauritanian economic dynamism. Nouakchott and Nouadhibou played an important role in West African migration. At independence, 70 per cent of Mauritanians were nomads, and skilled labourers were lacking. Nationals from Senegal, Mali, Guinea or Benin filled administrative posts. They also invested in the construction, electricity, plumbing and laundry sectors. From 1957 onwards, the construction of the new capital, Nouakchott, offered new employment opportunities. At the same time, Nouadhibou's importance grew with the mine's exploitation. In the 1970s, the government developed marine activities, but not many local people showed any interest in these economic possibilities. For that reason, Senegalese fishermen settled in the area and exploited them (Marfaing, 2005). With the discovery and first extraction of oil, Mauritania continues to attract sub-Saharan labourers. Although distinctive, this long tradition of immigration is

[12] I have published various articles based on field research on this topic, for instance Choplin (2008a), Choplin and Lombard (2008), Choplin (2010).

closely entangled with migratory transit to Europe. Thanks to this presence, foreigners have become active in exchanges with their countries of origin. They usually buy appliances and mobile phones in Nouadhibou to sell them in the Senegalese capital. Then, they come back from Dakar to Mauritania with belts, jewellery, shoes and other items made in China. Thus, the trajectories of these African traders overlap those of transit migrants (Streiff-Fénart and Poutignat, 2006; Choplin and Lombard, 2008). Thus mobility cannot be reduced to the simple migration of Africans wishing to pass into Europe. People from many countries (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, etc) have activities (as businessmen, traders, transporters, fishermen, pilgrims), which can be as diverse as their spatial trajectories (long-standing immigrants, transnational groups, illegal migrants, diaspora, etc).

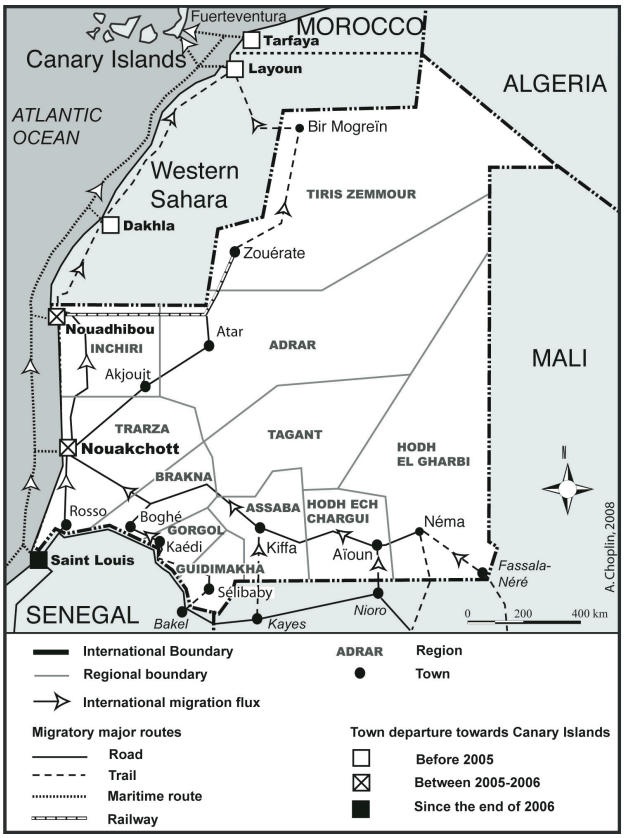

Fig. 3 : Migration routes in Mauritania. (Choplin, 2008a)

Diasporas, international businessmen, traders and immigrants have fostered a long tradition of regional interactions and exchanges which have critically influenced the country's evolution. Nowadays, Mauritania, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou are tied to Dakar, Saint-Louis, Bamako, and also to Paris, Hamburg, Yiwu, etc, situating them at the core of a broad transnational region. The image of the country has changed. It is no longer a desert country only inhabited by rural populations, especially nomads, living in the bush (*bâdiyya* in *hassâniyya* or *ladde* in *pulaar*), as depicted by shared foreign and national self-representation (Choplin and Ciavolella, 2008). Even the meanings of mobility and translocality have changed. The most mobile people are now a privileged minority of urban dwellers and immigrants actively involved in travelling and trading. The rebranding of Nouakchott is also striking. It is not any more the capital of nomads (implying Moorish nomads), but a cosmopolitan Saharan city (Brachet 2009 ; Boesen and Marfaing 2007), clearly different from the otherwise rather austere towns of the Mauritanian desert. Foreigners produce their own urban spaces and landmarks. The presence of migrants revives historical links with Senegal. It reminds us of the same Senegalese atmosphere that reigned there when it was founded, an atmosphere that Arab governments have, throughout the last three decades, rather clumsily

tried to hide (Choplin, 2009). Previously turned towards its hinterland, the Mauritanian nation is now looking far beyond the sea, a new both symbolic and geographic *branchement* which epitomizes a profound space reversal.

TERRITORIAL REVERSAL: NOUADHIBOU'S DECLINE AND NOUAKCHOTT'S REVIVAL

This 'offshore Mauritania' (Choplin and Lombard, 2009) turns to opportunities given by extraversion and external exchanges rather than in a sustainable and well-balanced development of internal national economic activities. With this very selective process, some places become more important than others, engaging a process of critical spatial transformations.

First of all, the position of cities is changing. In the last few years, Nouakchott has gained a prominent role in economic activities by attracting all the transnational and 'translocal networks' (Appadurai, 1996) in Mauritania. The political capital is thus replacing Nouadhibou as the economic capital of the country. In the 1980s, Nouadhibou benefited from fishing, export and mining income and was a flourishing economic city. Thirty years later, the situation has dramatically changed. The northern town of Nouadhibou is now in decline. Shipwrecks are rusting in the bay, fisheries infrastructures are deteriorating, the airport is moribund and fish captures are getting lower. The economic situation is worsening, even with the expected new road linking Nouadhibou to Nouakchott. Inaugurated in 2005, this road was supposed to open up the town and the whole northern region. However, in reality vehicles going to Western Sahara/Morocco bypass Nouadhibou as the town is no longer an essential relay centre for transport with the Maghreb. The road also facilitates a new mobility for Nouadhibou inhabitants searching for new activities. They move to Nouakchott where they can find more economic opportunities and send children to better schools. More than ever, the former economical capital depends on Nouakchott.

This economic decline accompanies a worsening of Nouadhibou's reputation all over the country. Institutions, media, politicians and economic entrepreneurs represent the city in a negative way. The media in particular describe drugs smuggling, alcohol consumption, prostitution, AIDS diffusion and recently clandestine migrations as scourging the city. If we use Scheele's (2008) definition of economic activities in the Saharan zone, we can say that Nouadhibou is the setting for '*haram* activities' (vicious) whereas Nouakchott benefits from '*hallal* activities' (virtuous). This is noticeable, for example, with the ambiguous management of the issue of migration. Although the number of migrants probably increased immediately after controls tightened in 2006,[13] two years later, field research evidence shows a clear reduction in overall numbers. Thus, migration has turned from a transit to a post-transit situation, where transcontinental crossings of newly arrived migrants towards Europe are decreasing (Choplin, 2010). Nevertheless, international organizations on the ground are gaining an interest in the migration issue, and it remains of public concern in media and political debates. They continue to produce migration statistics, often exaggerating the number of migrants as a justification of their interference in Mauritanian internal affairs and drastic border controls. There is a spatial and temporal distortion between the past problem of migration and the present-day initiative to tackle it, even if it is declining in numbers and importance. The real problem of migration is now the dramatic living conditions of migrants stuck in Nouadhibou and not their attempts to cross the sea. But this distortion is also spatial: the issue of migration has some importance most of all for Nouadhibou and for failing

[13] The European Union started to intervene from April 2006 onwards, by setting up a system of surveillance as part of Frontex, the agency in charge of managing EU external borders: one helicopter and several surveillance crafts were sent out, and men from the Spanish Guardia Civil were dispatched to train Mauritanian police in border control.

migrants living there, but money from international organizations arrives in Nouakchott. This finally reinforces the break between the two cities, making the spatial reversal obvious. If Nouakchott has always had difficulties in imposing itself as the real capital of Mauritania, this post-colonial town is now replacing the inherited colonial major city. Nouadhibou's decline announces the definitive centralization of political and economical power in Nouakchott. But this predominance of the capital city is possible only to the detriment of the rest of the country.

Nowadays, Nouakchott is both the first and maybe the only pole of concentration of political power and economic activities and the principal national gate for contacts and connections with the outer world. It is a sort of knot between national and transnational networks, a condition which has a remarkable impact on the town's evolution. The petro-dollar inflows entail urban changes, characterized by prestigious projects. The first historical colonial buildings in downtown have been destroyed to create a new central business district. The town council has decided to erect five skyscrapers. One of them will be the Oil Tower. Gulf companies are promoting many projects changing the urban setting. On the margins of the Arab and Muslim world, Mauritania offers a strategic geopolitical situation where these Gulf actors, especially Qatar, can exert their influence. Gulf companies have their headquarters downtown, in new luxury buildings like the Al-Khaima Centre. One of these, the Qatari Diar Real Estate Company, is promoting a $1-million luxurious resort 20 km north of the capital. Libyans are building a 30-floor hotel. Kuwaiti businessmen have planned to build another one in the north of the city. These new urban projects symbolize modernity, hope and the future.

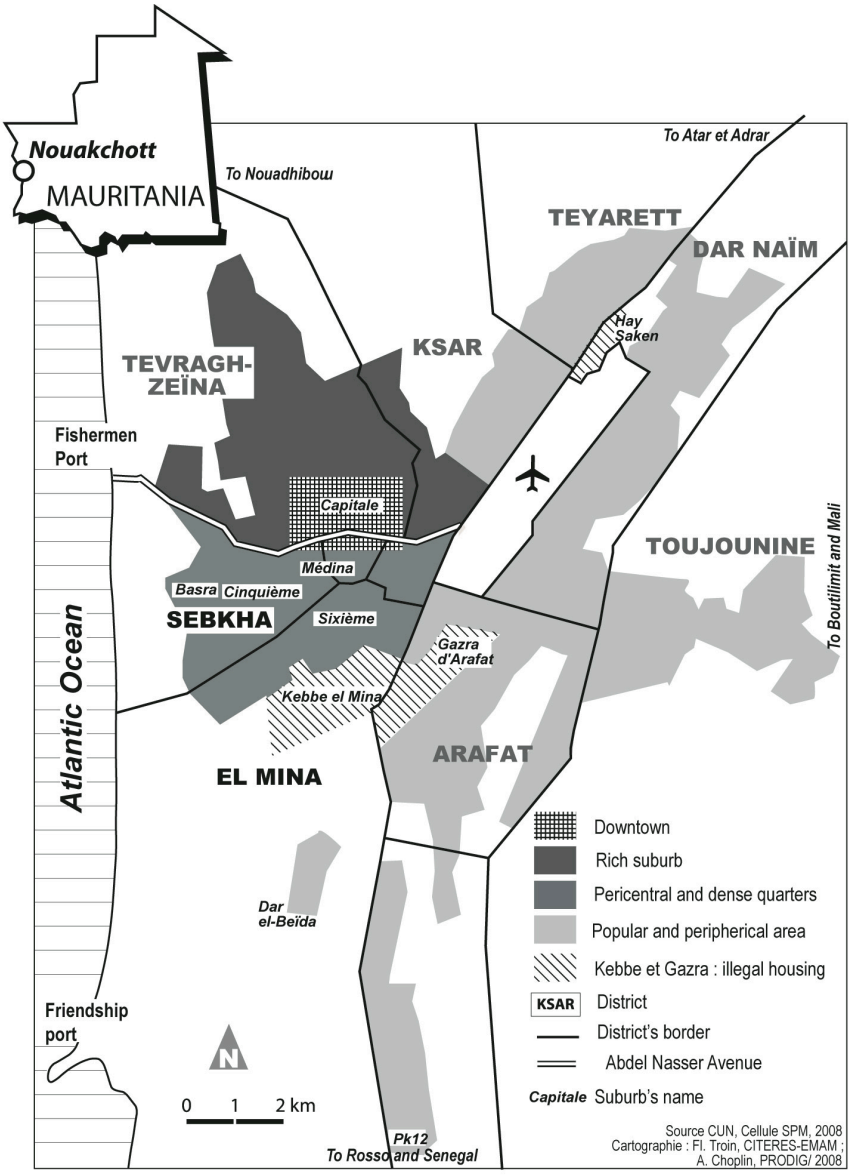

Fig 4 : Nouakchott : a little downtown ; vast suburbs (Choplin, 2009)

IN AND OUT: A MODERN CAPITAL FOR A MODERN SOCIETY?

Dish satellites have sprung up as far as the non-electrified edges of Nouakchott. Such contrasts epitomize a particular type of entry into global dynamics for Mauritania and Mauritanians. The capital city has become the showcase of internationalization, a tool for attracting flows of capital, for generating new inward investments and for speculation in land tenure. Yet, this globalization process is selective for spaces and also for people. Some groups are in, that is to say within the realm of, the globalizing world, and some are out. This becomes clear even through the discourse of the Nouakchott mayor, Ahmed Ould Hamza. While promoting a modern image of Nouakchott and the struggle against the '*mentalités rétrogrades*', he told me: '*On ne peut plus avoir des bédouins dans la ville, qui veulent continuer à vivre en ville comme en brousse*' (interview, 26 September 2008, Nouakchott). The re-imaging of the capital goes with identity changes in neo-urban society, in particular among the elite and the young generation.

Mauritanian people and the elite in particular adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the urban world, and therefore to the bush. They reject the urban way of life and glorify the traditional nomadic one. This elite, especially the Moorish one, hopes to revive the

supposedly real values of the bush, tent, camel and tea. But despite the political rhetoric of governments and Moorish elites about reviving a traditional society and making it modern, historical, trading and religious centres such as Chinguetti, Ouadane, Tichitt and Oualata are nothing but symbols of a declining world. In spite of new infrastructures and equipment (roads, electrification, the mobile phone network) that have sporadically given an economic impulse, these small towns are struggling to survive in the middle of an encroaching desert. In the last years, they have come to rely exclusively on tourism, which is potentially transforming them into museum towns for European people searching for real nomads and desert panoramas. But spatial transformations are not only about contrasts between rhetoric representations of the traditional *locus* of 'being Mauritanian' and the crude reality of a new urban society. Young Nouakchottois in particular can be awkward when they arrive in the bush, wearing brand-new Pierre Cardin shirts and leather shoes. Usually, they laugh at their cousins staying in the village, whom they pejoratively call *broussards* (Ciavolella, 2009). Moreover, they have some difficulties about standing the austerity of rural life and the fatigue of farming and field chores, such as fetching water, collecting firewood and herding cattle.

But the bush is no longer sufficient for the global elite looking for new horizons. Most of elite members in reality act as if they were escaping from Mauritania, by dreaming of a modern Mauritania, or of being somewhere else in luxury places. The wealthier women pay for very expensive private schools for their children in Nouakchott, Europe or the United States, or take them to visit the orthodontist in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. After work, some of them go to the Olympic stadium for walking or, for the more courageous of them, running to lose weight. In Nouakchott, they take refuge in places like restaurants, private saloons, clubs and rich suburbs, where they can nearly disconnect from real-life Mauritania and attach themselves to ephemeral symbolic spaces of luxury and modernity. These places are located in Nouakchott but they could be outside the capital city, everywhere else in the world, as they are completely cut off from real Mauritanian life (as endured by the rest of Mauritanian people even if they do not, or pretend not to, feel it). It reminds us of Foucault's concept of heterotopy,[14] of the utopia of being somewhere else, the myth of finding elements and symbols to construct identity outside the real social space of life. The elite dreams about resorts and casinos in Canary Islands, travels in Europe and above all goes to shopping malls in the Arabian Peninsula. In luxurious air-conditioned villas, they share their dreams of this new mixture of orientalism and occidentalism.

This new elite lives in *entre-soi*, far away from the rest of the Mauritanian population. They choose to get away by moving into new distant suburbs like Maouiyya City 3 km from the capital, or the Antennes, an outlying area 10 km north of the city. The security companies are now trendy. By going out towards the northern fringes of the city, this elite abandons the south of the city to the poorest and deepens both the spatial and the social separation. The main street, Abdel Nasser Avenue, clarifies this boundary, dividing the city in two distinct parts: the rich one in the North (Tevragh-Zeina district) and the poor one in the south (Sebkha, El Mina). Around these limits, the city centre is declining as a daily living space, turning into a simple territory of symbolic representation of power and the appropriate social setting for the elite to show its richness and its prestige, as the 4x4 luxury car trips of elite women demonstrate.

From the luxury residential areas, the happy few try to find their way out from Nouakchott, the urban artifice. But the upper class shares this feeling with the lower classes, with those inhabitants who have less opportunity to escape from it physically and symbolically. 'We are all strangers in Nouakchott,' is a common saying (Marchi, 1998). This feeling of foreignness reflects a negative image of this city. They say it is not a real city

[14] 'Il y a […] des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux, bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables. Ces lieux, parce qu'ils sont absolument autres que tous les emplacements qu'ils reflètent et dont ils parlent, je les appellerai, par opposition aux utopies, les hétérotopies' (Foucault, 1994).

because it is not as modern as Dakar, Dubai or European capitals. All these examples prove that this elite seems to be torn between the desire to reconnect with real life (the nomadic one) and its lifestyle, which is partially westernised and Dubai-orientalized. This notorious schizophrenia is producing a specific and peculiar way of life, created, felt and seen as a combination of some traditional elements (*boubous* and *melhafa* are worn daily by important people, the *khaima* is still put up in the family courtyard) and some modern ones (four-wheel drives, low-calorie diets). This could epitomize both a specific Mauritanian enrolment in global modernity and a social unrest. This entails a paradoxical feeling in relation to the city, between attraction and repulsion, fear and reassurance.

Young people feel a similar ambivalent sensation but not between 'traditional' imagined society and the urban world. It is rather between their new urban 'expectations of modernity' as Ferguson (1999) calls them, and the real opportunities to concretize them. From this contradiction, a new urban cultural ferment is stirring. We can deal with this issue from two different points of view: the cultural and political messages and meanings of this urban culture and its spatial materialization in the urban context. As regards political and cultural content, young Nouakchottois are receptive to what Jean and John Comaroff (2000) call the 'global culture of youth'. These young people feel excluded from business and neglected by the government, and that is precisely why they use the city as their major way to express their anger and hopes. Young people's culture emerges as a key player even in informal urban politics by directing their lifestyles, modes of interaction, sociality and even political consciousness on critical issues, even if they hardly deal directly with local national politics. Even though they cannot go out of Nouakchott, they express a strong *désir d'ailleurs*, just like their Senegalese neighbours (Fouquet, 2007). To materialize this, they mobilize music and any other artistic path that can express their imagination and aspirations. Rap and hip-hop are the most important urban modes of cultural expression. For ten years, this kind of music has been very trendy. Some singers like Monza and bands like Diam Min Tekki, Military Underground and Ewlad Leblad communicate on national topics (poverty, corruption, drugs, housing problems) and on more general issues (illegal immigration, war in Iraq, Israeli-Palestinian conflict..). Natives from popular and poor areas of Nouakchott (Cinquième, Sixième, Médina) present themselves as people coming from the ghetto or the *banlieue*, paraphrasing western hip-hop rhetoric. They identify themselves and become identified with these parts of the city, which have become their territory, a claimed territory. The recent self-organized hip-hop festival, Assalamalekum, shows that the young people profit from the few spaces of freedom conceded by the state, which is not very active in cultural events. Painters follow the same independent strategy, by creating *La maison des artistes*. Since 2002–3, exhibitions of painters' or sculptors' work have been put on in quite a few places in the capital. These new forms of expression are just at their early beginning: several spontaneous events like rap beats take place in open spaces of popular districts. In addition, even if Moorish and black Mauritanian young people do not listen exactly to the same music,[15] there is an initial convergence as they share similar global culture references. Despite their relative isolation at the global level, these young people do not only receive passively the global cultural flows depicting new diasporic 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai, 1996). They also actively participate in global culture formation and diffusion, while trying to make their voices heard.

In the urban milieu, young people are better connected to various information networks (the Arabic-language channels, notably Al-Jazeera, and the internet). This is linked to an

[15] Moorish young people seem to prefer Arab music imported from the Middle East to rap groups from New York/Bronx. They are more likely to watch the Star Academy and Lebanese clips than black American rappers on MTV. On their MP3 players, Moorish girls download the provocative songs by Nancy Ajram and follow on TV the Arab poetry contest in the UAE. They particularly support the Moorish candidate, Sidi Mohamed Ould Bamba who was crowned in August 2008 in Abu Dhabi as Emir of the Poets (information: discussion with Céline Lesourd).

increasing radicalization of political discourse. On the margins of the capital, in these areas both connected to globalization and excluded from its benefits, some youngsters are attracted by the spreading Islamic fundamentalism, adopting new anti-system approaches to political mobilization and a moralist vision of society (Choplin and Ciavolella, 2008; Choplin, 2008b). These views are directed at the moral regeneration of government, and resonate with poor citizens who watch Nouakchott's skyline being dotted with an increasing number of palatial residences. Never before has luxury been more conspicuous. People begin to question the source of this new-found wealth and denounce corruption. The new government claimed to fight against this scourge, but with few results (Ciavolella, 2009). Many other black and immoral activities are seen as related to elite and power networks and nourishing extremist conflicts. Drug consumption and trade (cocaine, hashish) in particular are flourishing, showing that Mauritania has become a hub for Mafia networks which are supposed to be linked to power networks which facilitate easy operations in the country. Young poor people especially face these contradictions between richness, ostentation and their condition and between moral rhetoric and the suspicion of immoral activities related to the state. Thus, some people easily turn towards harshly criticizing political movements. Wahhabi Islamic readings, spread through Saudi influence and Islamist NGOs, have begun to appear in the poorer areas (Arafat, Dar Naïm, El Mina, Riyad). Yahya Ould El Bara, a sociologist and Mauritanian Islam expert (2003) has described the rise in the number of mosques in the last few years: between 1967 and 2003 their number rose from 17 to 617. Of these, 322 were sponsored by benefactors from the Persian Gulf and 17 were distinctly fundamentalist in their political and religious approaches.

The most notable of these fundamentalist mosques is in El Mina, an impoverished part of the city. A large number of the faithful at this mosque are young *haratin* (descendants of former slaves), who are particularly attracted by the egalitarian discourse of the supposedly orthodox and pure Islam (ICG, 2005). The *haratin* criticize the traditional Mauritanian form of Islam based on *sufi* brotherhoods that has never really deeply questioned the oppressive traditional social hierarchies. In fact, fundamentalism provides a means to challenge the hegemony of the Marabout tribal chiefs who see themselves as the custodians of the religion.
Even if these new extremist affiliations in the Nouakchott peripheries are not directly connected to a terrorist movement (Choplin, 2008b), we should remind the reader that Mauritania has been suffering terrorist attacks since 2007, with Al-Qaeda claiming responsibility for them.[16] The capital city was targeted by terrorist attacks in February 2008, hitting Nouakchott's biggest nightclub and the nearby Israeli Embassy. Once again, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb claimed responsibility. In 2009, several events reinforced the crisis: gun battles between terrorists and policemen in Nouakchott; the murder of an American expatriate working in humanitarian aid projects in the street in broad daylight; and the first suicide bombing, that took place on 9 August outside the French embassy. The spread of these movements, although sporadic, give an image of instability in the capital. The inhabitants of Nouakchott are quite anxious because the city is now turning into a frightening and unsafe place.

In light of these remarks, it is clear that Mauritania is participating in globalization thanks to its political and economic links, diasporas, transnational networks and groups, translocal connections spread by migrants and openness to global cultural flows. Nevertheless, this participation is highly selective both in spatial and social terms. As

[16] The first big attack took place on 24 December 2007. Four French tourists were brutally murdered. It quickly became clear that this was not an ordinary crime, but rather a terrorist attack. Two days later, three soldiers were killed at the Al Ghallawia military base in northern Mauritania. The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), claimed responsibility for the attack.

Ferguson put it, 'such networks of political and economic connection do indeed span the globe, but they do not cover it' (Ferguson, 2006: 14). From a structural and economic point of view, Mauritanians are involved in a globe-hopping process rather than a globe-covering one. The increasing of "extraversion" has produced a situation where some places and social groups are 'in', globalized, whereas some others are 'out' suffering from increasing marginalization and disconnection. As we have seen, for example, this process has been prejudicial to Nouadhibou and its inhabitants as long as it is losing its historical role as the economic capital and gaining a terrific new role as a *haram* activities centre. Bleak and distant regions and their rural populations continue to be excluded, and this disconnection seems to become even more critical now, when new opportunities for development and social improvement only depend on the possibility of branching to transnational networks and resources extraversion. This is a similar situation to what the *haratin* in poor urban areas are enduring.

This selective process of globalization from a structural point of view has a critical impact on the cultural and symbolic side. From this point of view, globalization is involving Mauritanian society more broadly and profoundly, as long as it nourishes new representations of modernity and success. Nevertheless, it is striking to note that all these aspirations and expectations are fundamentally based on a projection of modernity outside the present-day Mauritanian territory. Modernity is something Mauritanians are still waiting for, contrasting with a hard daily reality of poverty and underdevelopment. But above all, modernity is something projected outside the country, in faraway western or eastern Eldorados in a significant example of heterotopy. These contrasts and contradictions are producing two different but intertwined effects: on one side, this transfer of an imagined and promised modernity into the future or into somewhere else produces a deep frustration. On the other, it is exactly from this frustration that new forms of social and cultural ferment can emerge, as in the case of the new urban youth but also in new religious fundamentalism. The next few years of Mauritanian evolution will tell us more about if and how this issue will turn into new political phenomena.

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